

[Temple of Grace]

FOLKLORE

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SUBJECT TEMPLE OF GRACE

Twenty West One Hundred and Fifteenth Street is the New York stamping ground of Daddy Grace, the self-styled rival of Father Divine. It was to this building that he came roaring out of Washington, with the as yet unfulfilled promise of dethroning the Father. Divine's lease on this property had expired, and at renewal time it was discovered that Daddy Grace had signed ahead of him. Divine's prestige tottered briefly, for it was a test of faith to his followers to accept the forced removal of God from his heaven by a mundane piece of paper. However, through an act of a diviner God, the Father acquired Crum Elbow as well as a handsome property on West One Hundred and Twenty-Fourth Street, and it was Daddy Grace whose triumph was now scarcely more than hollow.

The grace Temple on One Hundred and Fifteenth Street, still surrounded by various flourishing business establishments of Father Divine, is a red-brick building plastered over with crude angelic drawings and pious exhortations. The entrance hall leads directly to a

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flight of descending stairs over which is the inscription Grace Kitchen, or across a narrow threshold into the auditorium. This auditorium is of good size, seating possibly two hundred people. The floor is plain, reverberating board. The seats appear new and are cushioned in red leather of good quality. The walls are blue, with gilt borders 2 and two foot bases painted red. At the rear, to the right, are elevated rows of seats which the choir of fifteen lusty white-robed women occupy. On a platform above them is an upright piano.

At half-past seven the choir began to drift in, and until eight they sang unfamiliar hymns grouped around the piano. Occasionally the pianist quickened the tempo into swing, and the choir swayed and shuffled and beat out the rhythm with their hands and feet.

In the place occupied by the pulpit in the average church is an elevated, wooden enclosure, most nearly resembling the throne room of a maypole queen. Six graded steps lead up to it, and most of the incoming congregation knelt briefly at the foot of the stairs before settling in their seats. In the absence of Daddy Grace, who did not appear all evening, they made obeisance to the covered throne chair which stood center in the enclosure and was not uncovered at any time during the proceedings.

To the left of the throne room was orchestra space. There were a piano, a trombone, a drum, two sousaphones, and two trumpets. At half-past seven a child less than two was beating without reprimand on the drum. He played unceasingly until the orchestra members entered at past eight, and the drummer smilingly relieved him of the sticks.

The auditorium filled slowly . In all there were about seventy-five people. Most of the congregation came singly or in groups from the dining room, and many continued to munch after they were seated. There were at first no ushers. Toward the end of the evening a young man in a smart uniform with Captain lettered on an arm band and Grade Soldier lettered on his breast stood at stiff attention at the rear of the temple. His one duty was to admonish the half-dozen non-participants, a row of high-school boys, not to whisper. Oddly enough, at that time the place was bedlam.

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The crowd gathered informally. There were as many young children as adults. The grown-ups visited with each other. The children played up and down the aisles. There was unchecked laughter. There were only two or three [lone?] men with poverty and disinterest in their faces, who spoke to no one and appeared to have come in to escape the cold.

In contrast to the Divinites who are for the most part somberly and shabbily dressed, the Grace cohorts, though apparently poor, follow their own fashion dictates. The older women were plainly and poorly costumed, but the younger women wore skillful make-up, cheap hats smartly tilted, intriguing veils, and spike heels. One young woman who came in street clothes disappeared down the stairs and returned in an ankle-length dinner dress of black taffeta. It was she who accepted the offerings which white-frocked women brought her after each collection.

At eight the choir took their proper seats, and for half an hour sang familiar hymns, with frequent interpolations of praise to Daddy Grace. The congregation meanwhile had settled and quieted. No one joined in the singing, but there was perfunctory applause at the conclusion of each song. Occasionally a member turned to look up at the choir with mild interest.

When the choir service ended, a slim light brown man in a business suit appeared. At his entrance the orchestra began to play an unfamiliar tune, a variation of four notes, in swing tempo. The man said there would be a short prayer. His voice rose in illiterate and incoherent prayer with frequent name coupling of God and Daddy Grace. At their mention, there were murmurs of Amen and Praise Daddy.

The prayer concluded and the orchestra continued to play. Now the unchanging beat of the drum became insistent. Its steady monotone scraped the nerve center. The Africanesque beat went on...tom...tom...tom...tom... A woman in the front row rose. She flung out her arms. Her body was slim and strong and beautiful. Her delicate-featured dark face became ecstatic. She began to chant in a vibrant unmusical voice, "I love bread,

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sweet bread.” She clapped her hands in 4/4 time. Presently she began to walk up and down before the throne, 4 swaying from her hips, her feet shuffling in dance rhythm, singing over and over, “I love bread, sweet bread.”

A man rose and flung his hands in the air, waving them from the wrists. He began to moan and writhe. The monotonous beat of the drum was the one dominant note now, though the other instruments continued to play. Others rose and went through the motions of the woman. Children rose, too, children of grade school age, their faces strained and searching. A six year old boy clapped and stomped until his dull, pale, yellow face was red and moist.

When a shouting, shuffling believer was struck by the spirit, his face assumed a look of idiocy, and he began to pivot slowly in a circle. Tender arms steadied him, and he was guided along by out-stretched hands until he reached the milling throng before the throne, where he whirled and danced and shrieked in the whirling, dancing, shrieking mob until he fell exhausted to the floor. When he revived, he weaved back unsteadily to his seat and helped to steer others to the throne.

Finally both drummer and dancers were weary. The space before the throne cleared. A big pompous dark man in a business suit who had been sitting in one of the elevated seats in the rear, looking on with quiet approval, descended and came down the aisle, mounted the stairs leading to the throne, walked to a table to the right of the throne, and put on a gilded crown with a five-pointed star in its center. He advanced to the front of the dais and read briefly from the Bible. The reading concluded, he began to address the congregation as “dar ones” and “beloved”. His voice was oily, his expression crafty. His garbled speech played on the emotions. He spoke feelingly of the goodness of Daddy, of Daddy's great love for his flock. He called them Daddy's children and urged them to obey and trust Daddy, and reminded them that they were part of a United Kingdom of Prayer. When the swelling murmurs of “Amens” and “Praise Daddy” indicated their revived

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strength and ardor, he bent to the woman who had first started the singing and asked in his smooth voice, "Sister, will you start the singing again?"

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She rose and began to moan and sway. The orchestra took up her tune, but this time the drum did not beat, and suddenly a tambourine was heard, then another, and then another, until there were four or five. The beat was the same as the drum's had been, steady, monotonous, insidious, and far more deafening. When the open palms and closed fists slapped the center of the tambourine, the little disks jangled and added to the maddening sound.

The crowd's frenzy mounted. Their hysteria was greater than it had been before. They crowded to the space before the throne and their jerking bodies and distorted faces made them appear like participants in a sex orgy. Their cries were animal. When the young girls staggered back to their seats, they lay exhausted against the chair backs, tearing at their hair, with uncontrollable shudders shaking their bodies.

The mad dance went on for forty minutes, twice as long and twice as terrible as the first had been. When the man in the gilded crown felt their frenzy had reached its peak, he came to the front of the platform and stood silently until their awareness of his big, overbearing presence slowed their pace, muted the tambourines, and finally hushed the auditorium.

When they returned exhausted to their seats, he immediately asked them if they loved Daddy enough to keep his temple going by the purchase of his various products. There was no attempt to gloss this bald question. When there were sufficient murmurs of "Amen" and "Praise Daddy", he blew a police whistle and up and down the aisles went the white-frocked women hawking "Daddy Grace" toothpaste, hair pomade, lotions, and toiletries of every kind. One young woman was selling the Grace Magazine, 15 ¢ for the current issue, and 5 ¢ for back numbers.

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The sales were few, and the man in the gilded crown tried to encourage the buying by telling the congregation that soon Daddy Grace planned to open shops of every description all over Harlem, and there would be work for everybody.

When the last purchase had been made, the pompous man asked the first 6 spokesman to read the list of trinkets available for Christmas presents. The list included a cross bearing Daddy Grace's picture for \$1.50, a combination pen and pencil for a like sum, other articles at various prices, most of them with Daddy's picture as special inducement. The devotees signified their promise to purchase these trinkets by fervent "Amens."

This business concluded, the oily tongue called for the tithe offerings. Those with tithe money were asked to form a line in the center aisle. Half of the congregation got in line. The oily tongue asked for a march. The orchestra struck up. The whistle blew, and the marchers advanced to the front of the throne where they dropped their tithe money in the proffered baskets.

The sum collected totalled only a dollar and some odd cents. The man in the gilded crown concluded that there were some who had tithes but were disinclined to march. Thereupon he dispatched the white-frosted women down the aisles with baskets. They bent over the rows, asking persuasively, "Help us with the offering, dear heart."

When they had returned to the throne, there was a short speech about pledge money, and they were dispatched again. Again they bent down, begging as persuasively as before, "Help us with the offering, dear heart."

When the copper and silver pledges were brought for his approval, the smooth tongue asked for offerings for the House of Prayer. His voice filled with entreaty. He talked of the Grace temples in other cities and implored the congregation to gladden Daddy's heart by making this temple "the best of all." It could only be done with money, he said. His language was plain and his appeal was not garnished by any spiritual references. Rather,

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he fixed them with his eye and flatly informed them that the temple could not run without money, and it was money that he wanted. He then asked the pianist for a march. The pianist who was leaning indolently against the piano with his collar open and his tie loosed, said wearily, "I'm tired." One of the women in white ran down the aisle and returned with the man who had played for the choir. He obligingly swung into a march.

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The police whistle blew. The people with pledges were asked to line up in the center aisle. Happily and proudly they lined up in double file. Their manner of marching was different now. It was a shuffling strut, and their arms were bent up at the elbows and held firmly against the side. The line marched down the center to the throne, then divided and in single file shuffled up the two side aisles, met again at the rear of the hall, and then one after one went down the center aisle again and placed their pledge money in the basket.

The man in the gilded crown announced that the offerings had reached the total of \$5.06. He said that he did not want to take up their time by begging since the hour was growing late, but he wondered if there was anyone present who would raise the total to \$5.25. A man came forward immediately. Thus encouraged, the pompous leader asked if there was another beloved heart who would increase the sum to \$5.50. The woman who had led the singing promptly gave a quarter. The leader begged for another quarter for three or four minutes, but no one came forward. Abruptly he ended his plea and announced that he would now preach the sermon.

As he spoke a woman screamed, and her arm shot stiffly up into the air while her body grew rigid. Three women laid her on the floor in the aisle. She continued to scream and moan, and then began to talk unintelligibly in a high-pitched, unnatural voice.

The man in the gilded crown announced his text. His voice grew deep and stern. "I'll tell my story about the cow and the sheep who told on the man."

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He paused, and then waved his arm dramatically at the prostrate woman.

“Oh, my beloveds,” he said, “sometimes I tremble in fear at the power, the wonderful, mysterious power.”

He shook himself in semblance of terror, but it was not funny to the congregation. They stirred uneasily.

“You must fear the power, the wonderful power,” he exhorted them. “You 8 must fear and follow Daddy. You must have fear.”

A man shot out of his seat and began to moan and sob, flinging his arms around in the air. Smooth tongue looked at him with satisfaction. The congregation strained forward, a concerted sigh escaping from them. Others began to scream and moan. In a few minutes half the flock was on its feet, beginning again that stupefying, tireless dance. In a few minutes more almost every man, woman, and child was dancing, this time without music but with a uniformity of shuffling step and weaving arms.

The man in the gilded crown retired to the rear of the platform, his performance over.

The crazy dance went on. In the street the sound was audible a half block away.